

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan



نای حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد در افغانستان
Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan

MEDIA WATCH REPORT

Volume: 92

January: 2013

Preamble:

In Afghanistan reporters are vulnerable because of their usual exposure to violence. In the last 11 years, crimes against reporter have been steady, particularly during coverage of major security incidents like terrorist attacks. Media workers are often subject to violence by security forces and insurgents. Following a recent suicide attack, reporters were mistreated, insulted and even assaulted in some cases. The reason? Because they were covering the aftermath of the event. Police claim that they responded harshly to prevent more casualties. Regardless of the motivation, media workers were subject to violence. Security forces should protect reporters and citizens. While security is their job, they are also responsible for providing information to citizens and millions of news readers.

A decade after the establishment of a new regime, the police should understand their function and the function of the press. Unfortunately, this understanding does not exist among security forces. Furthermore, media editors should not insist that their employees expose themselves to unnecessary risks in order to obtain breaking news from dangerous locations.

This issue of Media Watch focuses on the following topics:

- 1. Security forces assault reporters during coverage of suicide attack**
- 2. Kunduz reporter insulted and intimidated**
- 3. Noorin TV reporters claim Salam Institute of Higher Education officials insulted them**
- 4. Balkh reporter claims security forces assaulted him**
- 5. Freedom of expression banner installed on Kabul road**
- 6. Young reporters demonstrate outside Ministry of Information and Culture**
- 7. Afghan National Federation of Journalists announces formation**
- 8. Ansar Weekly referred to Attorney General by Media Violations Assessment Commission**
- 9. First private television station launched in Kunar**
- 10. Nai releases 2012 media statistics**
- 11. President Karzai should prioritize freedom of speech**

Security forces assault reporters during coverage of suicide attack

Afghan security forces assaulted several media workers on the scene of a suicide attack that took place on 16 January 2013 in central Kabul.



Azadi Radio reporter Sayed Sabawoon and his son, a photojournalist, were beaten by security forces while they were covering the event. In an interview with Media Watch Mr. Sabawoon said: “When we



heard about the suicide attack we went to the scene. We hadn't crossed the square when we saw a bloodied man on the ground. When we tried to take photos of him, security forces came and hit us.”

Mr. Sabawoon said police first beat his son, Parwiz, but when they saw that he too was taking photos, they came after him.

Deutsche Welle and *8 AM Daily* reporter Gholam Hussain Sirat was also attacked. He said the police prevented media workers from accessing the scene. “I wanted to go to the site of the attack, but security officials said they would shoot at me if I went.”

On his second attempt to get to the site, he and others were assaulted and insulted. His photos were also deleted.

Azadi Radio reporter Hamida Osman claims she was mistreated too. Ms. Osma told Media Watch: “When the explosive-laden car came under the control of the police, the Kabul police chief approached reporters. At that moment I received a call from Azadi Radio headquarters in Prague. Because I stood apart from the male reporters, I asked [Basir] Salangi to give a comment. Instead he shouted at me and threatened to kill me. His security personnel pointed their weapons at me and ran towards me.”



Mr. Salangi denied her claims. “If any police officers yelled at reporters I will compensate,” he said. “I was at the scene, and if this happened, then judicial institutions must investigate. We had reports that additional terrorists would pose as journalists, which is why kept reporters away from the scene.”

Channel 1 TV reporter Kawoon Khamosh said he was abused by police on the same day. Mr. Khamosh told Media Watch: “A cameraman and I wanted to provide video and news reports on the casualties of the attack, and the police cursed and kicked us too.”

A large number of reporters covered the event. Police took measures to prevent possible attacks and protect the safety of journalists. On the other hand, some reporters were under pressure from editors to provide information about the incident, which contributed to misunderstanding between the police and reporters.

Freelance reporter Jawed Rostapoor described pressured from editors: “When the suicide attack happened I was present at the scene. One of the reporters was getting phone calls to provide updates and he was told that other reporters had breaking information, but he didn’t. Somehow the reporter was intimidated by being made to feel that he was lazy and not doing his job.”

Mr. Rostapoor said given this, the police actions are unacceptable.

In a press release Media Watch condemned the assault on reporters, noting that the attacks are against the law. In a press release Media Watch wrote: “National security forces understand they are responsible for the protection and safety of citizens, and journalists are responsible for providing information to the public and security forces should not disrupt their activities.”

We understand that the polices’ job is complicated in these situations and requires them to take necessary measures to prevent casualties, but that does not give them license to hinder reporters and limit information access.

We believe that in such cases police and other security forces take necessary measures to cooperate with media and reporters in order to pave the ground for information access. Any kind of irresponsible and violent behavior with reporters violates the applicable laws of the country and the Afghan government is responsible for supporting reporters and the press.

Media Watch asks reporters and media practitioners to pay close attention when providing news from the site of suicide and terrorist attack. Reporters should take necessary measures to protect themselves. They should not insist on entering prohibited areas when there is a possibility of another attack. Journalism principles mandate that no news report is worth the life of a reporter, and personal safety is a priority over getting the story in sensitive, emergency situations.

Kunduz reporter insulted and intimidated

Kunduz-based BBC reporter Ahmad Yama Shirzad claims he has been receiving a series of phone threats. In an interview with Media Watch he said the intimidation is in connection with a meeting held in Kunduz on 3 January 2013. More than 300 people, including government officials attended a so-called community meeting, but some government officials who spoke at the event criticized the press and accused media outlets of negative coverage. After the critical speeches, other reporters at the event asked Mr. Shirzad to defend the press, which he did.

Mr. Shirzad told Media Watch: “While I was speaking, I pointed out two issues. First, no media in this province has promoted negativism and propaganda, and if they did so, please point it out. Second, if your claims are true, why not complain to Media Violations Commission, prosecutors or the courts. I also said that they have these complaints because their personnel interests are being undermined.”

After the speech, the phone calls began, he added.

“From time to time, I receive phone calls from different phone numbers threatening me and asking why I criticized and challenged government officials in the meeting,” Mr. Shirzad added.

Media workers from Kunduz say the main purpose of the meeting was to undermine the media’s morale and to paint a negative picture of the press for the public. Kunduz province reporters who did not want their names to be disclosed claims that during last few years, reporters have exposed reports about corruption and government weaknesses. Officials want the public to lose confidence in the media to prevent critical reporting.

Kunduz Gov. Mohammad Anwar Jegdalek said the meeting was a public gathering and if there have been threats, they would be followed up. “I saw Media Watch’s message. I will follow this in a comprehensive way, but I do not believe that this is coordinated against journalists. I was in Kabul when this meeting held. Since there are no ethnic, language and religious problems in Kunduz, this problem will not exist as well. I will solve this when I return from Kabul.

He continued: “I talked to the reporters who were offended by government officials. In the next few days I will reconcile them and if reporters still complain about government officials they can clearly tell us and we will respond.”

Mr. Jegdalek acknowledges that some government directors may not admit criticism, but he asks Afghan media to accept criticism. The government is not angry with criticism made by media, and the media should not be afraid of criticisms against them.

Media Watch is firmly concerned about intimidation and threats to journalists in Kunduz and asks the government officials in Kunduz to take practical measures to eliminate these concerns. Media Watch also calls on the government to pave the ground for a free flow of information and freedom of expression in that province.

If government official hold the meeting to harm freedom of expression and access to information, its illegal and non-civil and indicates that government officials in Kunduz cannot accept criticism and persons who have been making threats should be prosecuted.

Noorin TV reporters claim Salam Institute of Higher Education officials insulted them

Noorin TV reporter Shekib Mirzada that when he and a cameraman wanted to interview a number of students attending Salam Institute of Higher Education, they were insulted by school officials.

Mr. Mirzada told Media Watch: “In a program broadcast by Noorin TV, a number of Salam Institute of Higher Education students complained about extortion. Students claimed that Salam Institute charges fees on holidays. For this reason we wanted to investigate and while we were interviewing some students outside the institute, a security guard asked us to go inside and meet with school officials. When we entered the yard some people attacked the cameraman and tried to take the film out and the videocamera broke. While I was trying to protect the camera, my back was injured.”

Salam Institute officials claim that the Noorin TV reporters entered without permission and disrupted activities at the school.

Acting Chairman Mohammad Esmayeel Labib Balkhi told Media Watch: “Despite warnings from our security guard, Noorin TV reporters entered the Institute and were going from one office to another. The guards told them that they have to exist the institute and obtain permission and then come in.”

Mr. Balkhi said the reporters violated journalism principles and ethics.

But Mr. Mirzada said the reporters were not interested in entering the institute, and that the guards insisted they come inside. Once they were inside, the school officials’ goal was to confiscate their film. School officials claim that rivals are attempting to discredit them.

Media Watch condemns attacks and insults on media workers and attempts to limit access to information. Journalists should also observe ethical behavior. When journalists act ethically to provide information to the public and earn public confidence, the public protects freedom of speech.

Balkh reporter claims security forces assaulted him

A summit of jihad leaders was held in Mazar-e Sharif recently and journalists were invited to the event. Mukhtar Wafaye, a reporter based in Mazar-e Sharif claims he was assaulted by security forces when he attempted to enter the site of the meeting.

He told Media Watch: “I was taking pictures of the items security officials were confiscating from attendees, and I was told to stop filming. I did, but the guards still assaulted me.”

Balkh governor spokesman Munir Farhad denied this. “The reporter disobeyed the instructions of security forces and interfered in security affairs. The security situation requires security forces to be serious in such cases and not let the enemies to get to their objectives.”

In addition to issuing an apology, Mr. Farhad claims he took Mr. Wafaye inside to resolve the situation. Mr. Farhad added that all media in the province are free to operate and freedom of expression is protected in Balkh.

Media Watch condemns any kind of insult and assault on journalists and any perpetrators should be punished. Security forces should understand that reporters are required to provide information to the public. Once again Media Watch calls on security forces to cooperate with and not attack journalists. Reporters are also required to observe journalism ethics and principles. In observing these principles, most problems can be prevented.

Freedom of expression banner installed on Kabul road

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan installed a banner that says “freedom of expression road” outside the Ministry of Information and Culture on 14 January 2013.

Nai Executive Director Abdul Mujeeb Khelvatgar told reporters: “Today, Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan on behalf of journalists associations installed a banner in front of the Ministry of Information and Culture and asks the ministry and Kabul Municipality to name the road “Freedom of Expression Road. Two months ago we asked the ministry and the Kabul Municipality to name this road as freedom of expression, but yet we have not received any response.”

Nai asked the Ministry of Information and Culture to support the initiative and requested journalists in coordination with Kabul municipality to rename the road.

Kabul roads are named for famous personalities and events, and a freedom of expression road is best



suited for the road outside the ministry. Ministry officials say they welcome naming a road “freedom of expression,” but the road outside the ministry is already named after someone.

Ministry advisor Jalal Noorani told Media Watch: “We welcome any organizations that recommend a good name for a road, especially freedom of expression, but the road that Nai has selected is already named for a person and this will never change.”

The Ministry of Information and Culture is under pressure to name this road and Nai’s banner was removed. However, journalists lobbied and the banner was reinstalled along with small posters.

It has been 10 years since freedom of speech returned to Afghanistan and dozens of reporters lost their lives in the cause. Journalists call on a road to be named freedom of speech in order to commemorate the services and sacrifices of reporters.

Young reporters demonstrate outside Ministry of Information and Culture

More than 50 reporters carried freedom of expression posters and demonstrated outside the Ministry of Information and Culture calling on the government to name the road outside the ministry “Freedom of



Expression Road.”

The demonstrators are part of Nai, which is representing journalists who want the road from Pol-e Bagh Omomi to Chahar Rahi Zeer Zamani “Freedom of Expression Road.”

Nai Executive Director Abdul Mujeeb Khalvargar, who led the demonstration, said: “The Ministry of Information and Culture and other relevant officials should respond. This is only a gathering. If they do not give us a positive response we will continue to our movement.”

Three months ago Nai requested the road name change and installed the banner, but the Ministry did not respond to Nai’s lobbying.

“We selected this road because the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Ministry of Information Technology and booksellers are located on this road,” Mr. Khalvatgar said. “Fifty years ago this road was called Democracy Wall.”

The demonstration ended peacefully with protestors announcing that they would continue to protest. Media Watch welcomed the peaceful protest and calls on the government to accept protestors’ demands.

Afghan National Federation of Journalists announces formation

The Afghan National Federation of Journalists, consisting of 10 journalists associations and unions, officially announced its formation.

Members of the federation say its purpose is to promote freedom of expression, free press, access the



information, and defend media worker rights and to build the capacity of media practitioners and forge cooperative efforts between media defense agencies and international supporters.

In a press conference held at the Kabul Star Hotel on 20 January 2013, Afghanistan National Journalist Union President Abdul Hamid Mobarez said: “Efforts to create a federation began four years ago and today we accomplished that.”

The federation, he added, would be an ally and defender of reporters and media workers.

Free Afghan Journalists Director Ekhpulwak Safi also spoke and said: “This federation will defend the rights of journalists under a unified umbrella and those institutions that work in their defense can become members of the federation.”

Federation activities will be governed by a council consisting of nine association and union members. The decisions will be approved by two-thirds majority. The council’s quorum should be minimum seven members, he added.

Media Watch Manager Sediqullah Tauhidi said: “The formation of a federation is a valuable step towards supporting freedom of expression in Afghanistan and can result in good achievements for media in the country.”

He added: “The Afghan National Federation of Journalists announces that its able to attract other journalists associations defending media and journalists with the same rights and responsibilities.”

Members of the federation include ANJU, the Afghan National Union of Journalists and Reporters, South Asia Free Media Association, South Asia Women Journalists Association of Afghanistan, Afghan Women Journalists Association, Afghan Journalists Defense Committee, Afghan Journalists Safety Committee and Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan.

Media Watch welcomes the formation of the federation and hopes that the federation can address problems facing the Afghan press. We hope the federation is able to successfully defend media outlets and media workers and to represent a unified front against intimidation, assault and threats against journalists. The need for a federation has been felt for the last 11 years. Unions and associations were operating independently or sometimes cooperatively, but a federation did not exist.

Ansar Weekly referred to Attorney General by Media Violations Assessment Commission

In an interview with Media Watch, *Ansar Weekly* complained about a recent decision of the Media Violation Assessment Commission, which reviews complaints against media workers and outlets. “Based on the complaints made by the BBC to the Media Violations Assessment Commission, the newspaper was asked to respond to a report that claimed a woman was raped by the BBC director published two months ago.”

Ansar Weekly Editor-in-Chief Jawad Sarwari said he presented documents and evidence to the commission and left with the impression that the problem was resolved. Two months later he received a phone call from the Attorney General’s Office, stating that the commission forwarded the complaint for further investigation by prosecutors.

“After presenting the required documents to prosecutors, we thought this issue was solved, but once again Media Violations Assessment Commission sent a letter to the Attorney General’s Office for a second time,” Mr. Sarwari said.

Commission member Wahid Gharwal told Media Watch: “After studying the BBC complaint, and the newspaper’s documents, the commission referred the issue to the Office of the Attorney General.”

Mr. Sarwari said his paper's report was based on a third source. "We used another website, also a foreign news organization, as the source of our report, but the Commission should answer why one source is credible and the source we used is not credible."

He added: "It's interesting to me that the Ministry of Information and Culture supports a foreign news organization over an Afghan one, and does not accept another foreign news organizations sources as credible."

But Mr. Gharwal said the media should distinguishing between accurate and non-accurate stories: "It's not possible to excuse your actions by passing responsibility on to a third party news source."

Media Watch condemns pressures that restrict the media and reporters and that are illegal.

Based on Afghanistan's Mass Media Law, the Ministry of Information and Culture has to establish a Mass Media Commission, which the ministry has failed to do to date. This commission would be the entity to arbitrate this case. The commission that currently resolves legal disputes and assesses complaints is unlawful and the commission's decisions, according to Media Watch, are personal decisions that do not hold legal weight.

First private television station launched in Kunar

Kunar's first private television station, which began its broadcast on 23 January 2013, is called Zula TV. The station launched its test broadcasts several months ago and now has seven hours of programming a day.

Zula TV Director Shekibullah Saneen told Media Watch: "In addition to the provincial center our station also covers Dangan, Asmar, Shiegal, Marawara, Narang, Sarkano, Khas Kunar and Chawki districts."

Mr. Saneen said that the station filled a critical gap. The station, he says, will broadcast diverse programs with a focus on human rights and rule of law.

Zula also consists of a radio station of the same name that launched in 2007 and a newspaper.

Mr. Saneen said he is not intimidated by the challenges facing Afghan media, like violence.

Officials in Kunar have welcomed the establishment of the private station. Kunar's Information and Culture Department Director Abdul Qaioum Hakimzai told Media Watch: "Our department does not hesitate to support this station, but we can only provide legal support, like issuing a license.

Kunar is among Afghanistan's most insecure provinces. In addition to Zula, there are a few private FM stations and RTA.

Media Watch believes that the station's creation marks a step towards institutionalizing freedom of expression and will contribute to developments in the province.

Many media outlets are restricted to the main cities. Villagers in rural areas are deprived from electronic media, which can play a key role in rural areas, such as promoting peace and inter-community dialogue.

Nai releases 2012 media statistics

In a press conference held at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, Media Watch Manager Sediqullah Tauhidi reported that 14 television networks and 12 radio stations were established in 2012. In terms of TV, two were established in Herat, five in Mazar-e Sharif and one each in Baghlan, Kunar and Nangarhar provinces.

But 2012 also saw challenges for Afghan media, such as limited access to information, closure of media outlets and other issues.

Government newspapers Itefaq-e Islam and Azad Taraf stopped publishing for different reasons, Mr. Tauhidi added. Backlash following their closure resulted in Itefaq-e Islam resuming publication.

Mr. Tauhidi cited insecurity, economic problems, organizational problems and lack of access to information as major challenges for reporters and the press in 2012. "Because of a lack of advertisements, newspapers are facing financial problems. From a security perspective, reporters were threatened by anti-government elements and government officials."

Mr. Tauhidi also highlighted problems between media workers and their employers. "Media owners can hire and fire media workers at will, they do not provide holidays or pension, transportation and other benefits. Contractually they have no obligations to their employees."

A draft access to information law was finalized and published by the Ministry of Justice.

President Karzai should prioritize freedom of speech

President Karzai in a recent trip to the United States to discuss a bilateral security agreement and support for Afghanistan's security forces. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan asks the president to prioritize freedom of expression issues in his talks with American officials.

In a press conference held on 8 January 2012, Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan Director Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar asked the president to consider free expression while signing security agreements.

Mr. Khalvatgar said: “On behalf of Afghanistan’s media, we ask the president to prioritize freedom of expression during his talks with U.S. officials.”

Media is one of the greatest achievement of the current political system; it is also among the most vulnerable of achievements. Security developments are directly tied to the media’s ability to operate.

Mr. Khalvatgar said: “The media’s focus is on the capital and provincial cities. Reporters are afraid to venture beyond these areas.”

As a result, protecting free speech and a free press should be political priorities. Information provides social capital, and without access to information, society breaks down.

Media Watch calls on international governments to recall their main slogans: “Support of freedom of expression and democratic development are repeated refrains by the international community. We ask them to consider their importance in their agreements and not to ignore these issues.”

One of the principles of a democratic society is freedom of expression — and it must be kept in mind in any bilateral agreements.

Attention!

All journalists and media organizations are hereby notified that Mr. Mohammad Qasem Rahmani works with the Media Watch in the capacity of Media Lawyer. Those journalists and/or media outlets that face legal issues in connection with their media related and journalistic activities, or need consultation on performing such activities, may contact him by phone at **0799 830 905** or via email at: m.qasim@nai.org.af .

For more information on Media Watch project please contact our team at:

Mohammad Saber Fahim
Media Watch Senior reporter
saber.fahim@nai.org.af
saberf4@gmail.com

Cell# +93 (0) 700-266-727

To obtain a soft copy of the report, please visit the following link: <http://www.nai.org.af/Mediawatch.htm>

Note:

1. *To maintain confidentiality and to protect sources it was not possible for Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan to corroborate the incidents by carrying out additional investigations.*
2. *Copy right is reserved for Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan,*